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Video message for the Conference "Current and Future Linguistic Needs of Graduates on the European and International Labour Markets"

Brussels, 27 September 2007

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am glad to be able to send you this message and express all my wishes for the success of your conference, as institutional engagements prevent me from being present in Brussels.

The theme you are going to debate is crucial to create a true knowledge society in Europe, where mastery of languages is a highly desirable life-skill.

In November 2004 I was appointed as the first European Commissioner ever whose portfolio explicitly included responsibility for multilingualism. The decision of President Barroso to include "Multilingualism" as part of a portfolio for the first time in the history of the Commission was a clear indication of the importance of this for the Barroso Commission.

It was an important step, because it demonstrated political awareness and will at the highest level of the pressing need to piece together the complex puzzle which goes under the generic heading of multilingualism.

The Commission's multilingualism policy has three aims:

- to encourage language learning and promote linguistic diversity in society;
- to foster a healthy multilingual economy, and

- to give citizens access to European Union legislation, procedures and information in their own languages.

Since 2004 the Commission's policy for languages has moved on apace. Under the watchword: "The more languages you know, the more of a person you are," the European Commission reaffirmed its commitment to multilingualism in November 2005 when it adopted its first ever Communication on this issue entitled "A New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism".

This document spells out the Commission's vision for promoting multilingualism in European society and there is an important role for the higher-education sector to play in turning that vision into reality.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Knowledge of languages leads to cultural awareness, tolerance and respect for others. It also promotes employability and social cohesion. Action by the Union and the Member States to uphold multilingualism therefore has a direct impact on the life of every citizen.

This is why the Commission has called on the Member States to play their part in furthering the teaching, learning and use of languages within their education systems. Developing language and intercultural skills is a precondition to the creation of a European area of higher education.

The Communication stresses the importance of language skills for worker mobility and the competitiveness of the EU economy. It also asks Member States to review training programmes at universities to ensure that they equip students in the language professions with the right skills.

Moreover, it points out that more needs to be done to strengthen the role of the multi-million-euro language industries which are continuing to grow in

the European Union. More investment is needed in language-related research aimed at overcoming language barriers through new information and communication technologies, as well as in the social and human sciences.

According to a recent Eurobarometer survey, only half of the EU's citizens say they can hold a conversation in a second language apart from their mother tongue. It goes without saying that the European programmes cannot in themselves bear the main burden of promoting language learning and linguistic diversity. Therefore the Member States have been invited to adopt national action plans to promote multilingualism, further improvements in language teacher training, adequate provision for early language learning, and more teaching of school subjects through a foreign language.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Higher-education institutions could play a more active role in promoting multilingualism. Each university needs a coherent language policy clarifying its role in promoting language learning and linguistic diversity, both among its learners and in the wider community.

The special place of higher-education institutions brings with it certain responsibilities vis-à-vis the rest of society. Universities should be taking the lead in promoting societal and individual multilingualism.

Universities are often linguistically rich environments: specialist teaching staff, facilities for language learning, international links and host students and teachers from abroad. It makes perfect sense for universities to capitalise on this fact by, at the very least, making sure that all their students and staff—whatever their subject area—have opportunities for improving their language skills.

Of course, the main opportunities for exchanges in higher education, acting both as a motivation and an instrument for improvement of the linguistic skills of European students, are to be found in the Erasmus action of the Socrates programme and in the increased mobility between universities implementing the Bologna declaration.

As we know, the linguistic benefits of the Erasmus exchanges are not limited to what is learnt in the classroom, and extend to the practical opportunities to put newly acquired skills to use on the campus, in local bars, or in a shared apartment with multilingual flatmates. This is probably the reason why Erasmus is one of the most popular actions run by the European Commission.

It is true that there is a growing trend towards teaching through the medium of English instead of through the national or regional language with unforeseen implications for these languages.

But as more and more young people end compulsory school with a reasonable communicative competence in a second EU language, we are confident that more choice could be offered to students wishing to engage in Erasmus mobility.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Responsibility for making further progress rests mainly with Member States (be it at national, regional or local level), but the Commission will also do all within its remit to reinforce awareness of multilingualism and to improve the consistency of action taken at different levels.

I have been proud to have been given the opportunity to develop a new framework strategy for multilingualism as a policy of its own. From 1st of January 2007, with the integration of Bulgaria and Romania in the European Union, Multilingualism is transferred to Commissioner Leonard Orban. The

Union now has 23 official languages. Our languages represent and express our identities and cultures. And cultures define Europe much more than business. As the Czech writer Milan Kundera rightly put it: "Europe – it is maximum diversity in minimum space". To know, to understand and to respect this diversity means to relate to Europe as our home. Therefore I believe that multilingualism is a permanent value of the EU and I will continue to play an active role in its promotion.

Thank you.

